

## LITERATURA

Maternity and empowerment in *Coriolanus*

Bulla, María del Valle – Carrizo, Lorena – Castillo, Viviana



### MATERNITY AND EMPOWERMENT IN *CORIOLANUS*

**Bulla, María Del Valle**

**Carrizo, Lorena**

**Castillo, Viviana**

**Universidad Nacional de Catamarca**

In Classical Rome, Roman women were considered a fundamental tool for the transmission of culture. In Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*, Volumnia displays an outstanding authority, derived from, both, her social identity as a mother and from her identification with the Roman concept of *virtue*. Besides, as a mother, Volumnia exerts a notable power over her son that allows her to trespass the private sphere to gain a public position at that political moment. In this way, it is possible to see how Volumnia, having as a starting point her maternal role and ascribing to the tenets of patriarchal Rome, empowers herself and trespasses the barriers proper to her gender. In this way, she becomes the public figure capable to save Rome from its destruction. The objectives of this paper are to identify Volumnia's adequacy to the Roman patriarchal concept of virtue and her empowerment through her maternity. Textual analysis is the methodology applied to the lines selected to fulfill the objectives. In this way Shakespeare, through Volumnia's feminine figure, presents maternal empowerment as a means women have to achieve public relevance in other way denied to them.

**Key Words: barriers – gender – patriarchal - relevance**

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In all his plays, Shakespeare always introduces female characters whose importance varies, among other circumstances, according to the literary genre. In this way, while the importance of female characters is evident –Viola, Portia, Rosalind- in the Romantic Comedies, in the tragedies, the female characters are subsidiary to men as it happens with Cordelia, Ophelia, Desdemona and even Lady Macbeth. And all these plays present as a common denominator the fact that these female characters have traits that subvert the patriarchal stereotype and, therefore, they have either to disguise themselves to show their outstanding capacities, as it happens in the Romantic Comedies, or they die, as it happens in the Tragedies.

A similar situation takes place in the Roman Plays. Most of the female characters find a tragic end: Portia, Cleopatra, Lavinia. Instead, a noticeable feature in *Coriolanus* is that it presents a female character that succeeds in achieving a public position not compatible with her gender. Indeed, Volumnia is a Roman mother, who underneath the façade of motherhood uses the maternal role to dominate her son and to move into the public sphere. So the purpose of this work is to consider Volumnia's empowerment through her son and her success in becoming a public figure, position otherwise denied to a woman.

In the middle of civil discontent, Caius Martius, later Coriolanus, prevents the destruction of Rome by the Volscians led by Tullus Aufidius. Volumnia, Caius Martius' mother rejoices at her son's bravery when he is given the name of Coriolanus. At his return, Coriolanus is offered the consulship but, on account of the despise he shows towards the tribunes Sicinius and Brutus, the consulship is revoked. This causes a conflict between the plebeians and the patricians. On the brink of a civil strife, Volumnia convinces his son to apologize to the citizens against his own will, thus saving Rome from destruction. Then, the tribunes accuse Coriolanus of tyranny. This enrages Coriolanus. As he is banished from Rome, he offers his services to Tullus Aufidius. With the army prepared to devastate Rome, Coriolanus ignores the Roman diplomatic pleas for mercy. Instead, Volumnia succeeds in her plea and hence saves Rome from destruction for the second time. She is publicly received by the patricians and plebeians and recognized as Rome's savior.

Kahn (1997: 1) states that "... gender is an ideology. At least it works like an ideology in rendering something brought about by human beings into something reified, transcendent, 'natural' and inaccessible to human intervention". So, in order to appreciate Volumnia's subversion of her natural position in society, it is first necessary

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to consider the concepts of patriarchy and *virtus*, and the importance of motherhood in Rome.

Ancient Rome is a patriarchal society up to the point that the expression “Romanness” has the same connotations of “masculinity”, even with the possibility of acting as interchangeable terms (Kahn 1997: 2). One central concept of Romanness is *virtus*. Hunter (Kahn 1997: 14-5) argues that *virtus* involves some characteristics as “soldierly, severe, self-controlled, self disciplined...”. These features define masculinity in Ancient Rome to such an extent that even the root of *virtus* –vir- signifies “man”, thus having a gender connotation. And Cominus’ words “It is held / That valour is the chiefest virtue and / Most dignifies the haver” (II, ii, 81-2)<sup>1</sup> directly states “valour” as another key component of *virtus* and hence of manliness in a Rome always at war. In this way, Roman *virtus* turns out to be “a marker of sexual difference crucial to the construction of the male subject – the Roman hero” (Kahn 1997: 15).

As regards motherhood in ancient Greece, it depended on the tension of two constructions: “that a mother should prize her sons above all else, and that a mother produces sons for the state, to which she owes them.” (Kahn 1997:146) To this construction, DuBois (1985: 203) adds that “Roman women enjoyed enormous power as mothers”. Besides, Cantarella (1987: 134) considers that Roman women were viewed as an essential tool for the transmission of a culture. Indeed, though women lacked public power because they were inferior to men, they were primordial in the molding of the Roman male subject (Felman 1981: 41).

But, at this point, it is also suitable to consider Adrienne Rich’s conception of motherhood. In *Of Woman Born* (1977), she stated that, in patriarchy, motherhood is built on the dichotomy of submission and empowerment. In this context, maternity is a tactic of empowerment that makes it a reflection of the despotism present in patriarchy. The difference is that, in this case, women are the ones who keep the system functioning by securing that their children will enjoy a position of power. While Tancke (2005: pg 14), in consonance with Rich, and referring to women authors, upholds that the sense of power that derives from being a mother results “from the opportunities that the role offers to transcend the boundaries of sex but also from ... the presentation of the self of being able to direct their children in what they assume to be the right course of life.”

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<sup>1</sup> The quotations of the play *Coriolanus* are taken from LOTT, Bernard (1981)

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Shakespeare presents in Volumnia a female character who, due to her female condition, is “socially peripheral” (Babcock 1978: 32). And this is well reflected in the fact that Volumnia has not an important stage life. Indeed, the amount of her apparitions is quite meaningless if in relation to her relevance by the end of the play. Out of twenty nine scenes, she appears only in seven: six scenes in which she speaks which include a private/domestic scene and one in which her voice is not heard. But, though her stage life is so reduced, she is symbolically central on account of her condition of a mother (Babcock 1978: 32). And her power as a mother is awesome as “she is complicit with the ideology of *virtus*, to mold her son into the sword.” (Kahn 1997: 19) This identification with the “masculine, militarist ideology of Rome” and the power she has over her son gives her a “crucial political leverage” ((Kahn 1997: 147-8) that will ultimately place her in a public position. In this way, her growth as a character is astounding considering that she leaves the private/domestic female sphere to go into the public one and become the Saviour of Rome.

Therefore, Volumnia is the archetype of the Roman matron or Spartan mother. Of noble birth, a patrician, she is a faithful transmitter of the patriarchal ideology of *virtus* and adheres to its “masculine codes that emphasize power, honor, war and vengeance” (Conejero Dionís-Bayer 2003: 32). As a transmitter of *virtus*, she never doubted, since Coriolanus’ early adolescence about sending him “To a cruel war” (I, iii, 12) and she disclosed the joy she felt “at first hearing he was a man-child” (I, iii, 15) or when knowing “he had proved himself a man” (I, iii, 16).

One aspect of *virtus* is honor. Volumnia sees in martial life Coriolanus’ possibility to attain honor and, with honor, fame. For that reason, Volumnia, “considering how honor would become such person” (I, iii, 9), encourages him to “seek danger where he was like to find fame” (I, iii, 12). She even tells Virgilia –Coriolanus’ wife- that “If my son were my husband, I should freelier rejoice in that absence wherein he won honour than in the embracement of his bed where he should show most love.” (I, iii, 2-5) Even the loss of a child is secondary, provided he dies honourably. So much so that Volumnia states she prefers a son dead but never dishonoured. This is why, though conscious of the danger Coriolanus was facing, her mood never changes up to the point of despising Virgilia’s sad condition and telling Valeria, “Let her alone, Lady; as she is now, she will but disease our better mirth” (I, iii, 100).

In her full commitment to masculine codes, Volumnia even speaks like a warrior. The images she uses to describe how she imagines her son at war resemble those uttered by the Sergeant in Macbeth. Harsh images full of cruelty, as she figures

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Coriolanus plucking “Aufidius down by th’ hair” (I, iii, 28), beating “Aufidius’ head below his knee / And tread upon his neck” (I, iii, 44-45) with “his bloody brow” (I, iii, 32), or images of destruction, with Coriolanus’ “mowing a field” revealing no mercy. The lines display a fierceness proper to a soldier, not to a mother, when she gloats that her only son should resemble a war machine. For the same reason, on Coriolanus’ arrival from war, she exclaims that “Death, that dark spirit, in’s nery arm doth lie, / Which being advanced, declines, and then men die” (II, i, 149-50)

And as regards Coriolanus himself, she is not troubled by the wounds he might receive. Even more, she considers Coriolanus’ blood a prize as” It more becomes a man / Than gilt his trophy” (I, iii, 83). For this reason, she exclaims with joy “O, he is wounded; I thank the gods for ‘t” (II, i, 112). She is so embedded in the masculine code that she becomes Menenius’ equal when full of pride they discuss Coriolanus’ wounds,

Vol: He received in the repulse of Tarquin seven hurts l’ the body.

Men: One l’ the neck, and two in the thigh – there’s nine that I know

Vol: He had, before this last expedition, twenty-five wounds upon him

Men: Now it’s twenty-seven. Every gash was an enemy’s grave.” (II, ii, 141-5)

But parallel to these features, Shakespeare develops others that will allow Volumnia to move from the private into the public sphere, by empowering herself through Coriolanus’ victories and submission, until she occupies her son’s former public place of being Rome’s saviour.

Volumnia’s movement from the private to the public scene begins to be established since the very beginning of the play. As said before, Volumnia only appears in seven out of twenty nine scenes. She is indirectly presented by the plebeians who are speaking about her son Coriolanus -also indirectly presented- in the public opening scene. One of the Citizens, referring to Coriolanus’ martial career, expresses that “he did it (save Rome) to please his mother, and to be partly proud, which he is even to the altitude of his virtue” (I, i, 30-1). Important hints can be derived from these words:

1. This is a public scene. The fact that Volumnia is mentioned in the first scene in relation to a public figure, in a public situation and in reference to an event of the state –a war- foreshadows the transcendence she will have beyond the private sphere.

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2. The fact that it is public knowledge that Coriolanus only wants to please his mother speaks of her dominance upon him. It also describes the kind and strength of the mother-son bond.
3. Coriolanus' adherence to *virtus* tells us of Volumnias' response to the precepts of patriarchy and her fulfillment of what Roman patriarchy expects from her as the transmitter of codes.

Indeed, Volumnia "collaborates with the hero and induces action but she has her own objectives and interests and uses the hero to attain them" (Conejero Diónis-Bayer 2003: 32). Her objective is public recognition and the means to obtain it is to use her son's fame to empower herself to get the desired position. Thus, she appropriates Coriolanus' moment of glory when she acknowledges her self realization through the deeds of her son, "I have lived / To see inherited my very wishes / and the buildings of my fancy" (II, I, 187-9). And she also takes hold of Menenius' public role when she subtly proposes the consulship, "Only / There's one thing wanting, which I doubt not but / Our Rome will cast upon thee (Coriolanus)" (II, I, 190-1). Volumnia is so utterly sure of her power over her son that she does not even consult him, though Coriolanus is against this "Know, good mother, / I had rather be their servant in my way / Than sway with them in theirs" (II, I, 191-3). According to Conejero Dionís-Bayer (2003: 35), "The potent warrior becomes an extension of his mother that uses him to indirectly fulfill her desires for power, as women were barred from public posts in Ancient Rome". So, when Coriolanus mars the opportunity of being appointed consul, which drives Rome to the brink of a civil war, a new facet of Volumnia's character begins to emerge: her "art of verbal seduction" ((Conejero Dionís-Bayer 2003: 32) combined with the art of manipulation.

Volumnia has the difficult task of persuading Coriolanus to return and humbly show his wounds to the plebeians to calm them down. The strategy she uses to make him believe that, by acting against his nature, he is not actually changing his nature. To attain this, she moves from a rational discourse into an emotional one and ends changing the tone used. So, first Volumnia identifies herself with Coriolanus in their set of values dealing with *virtus*. But these have to be subdued "To better vantage" (III, ii 33), and not to be "too absolute, / Though there in you can never be too noble, / But when extremities speak" (III, ii, 42) and rationally explains him how to dissemble: "But with such word that are but rooted in / Your tongue, though but bastards and syllables / Of no allowance to your bosom's truth" (III, ii, 55-7).



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Volumnia, seeing Coriolanus' resistance, suddenly becomes emotional, a mother that treats her son sweetly and pleadingly as if he were a little child, "I prithee now, my son," (III, ii, 75), "Prithee now, / Go, and be ruled," (III, ii, 92-3), "Prithee now, say you will and go about it" (III, ii, 100). But at the same time she does not lose the opportunity of reminding him that "I prithee now, sweet son, as though hast said / My praises made thee first a soldier, so / To have a praise for this, perform a part" (III, ii, 99-101)

Realizing it is not enough, Volumnia changes her tone and becomes the offended and hurt mother who does not want to be ill treated by her son, "At thy choice, then! / To beg of thee it is my more dishonour / Than those of them" (III, ii, 124-5) making clear that he absolutely owes everything to her as "Thy valiantness was mine, thou suck'st it from me, / But owe thy pride thyself" (III, ii, 129-130).

Though Coriolanus has been striving not to be convinced, finally, as a child, he utters "Chide me no more" (III, ii, 131) and "Look, I am going" (III, ii, 134), which marks his utter capitulation and negation of his internal self. This situation is emphasized by Volumnia's ironic closing line "Do your will" (III, ii, 138). So, Volumnia not only adheres to the code of masculinity but she even goes beyond the limits of decency in her struggle to obtain power (Conejero Dionís-Bayer 2003: 33). With Coriolanus' return to go on with the parade, Volumnia saves Rome from civil war for the first time.

As "Coriolanus" disappears from the Roman public scene on account of his banishment, Volumnia begins to occupy the place he has left vacant. First, she shows her power over the tribunes and Menenius and then she saves Rome from its complete destruction for the second time.

In the public scene IV, ii, after Coriolanus' banishment, Volumnia, with all her dominating strength, displaying masculine features, outdoes the tribunes Sicinius and Brutus. Her power and strong temperament is enhanced by the fact that this is the moment when the tribunes are gloating over their victory, "We have shown our power" (IV, ii, 3). But they fear Volumnia and on seeing her, they want to escape. Volumnia vents all her rage against them, and openly accuses them of having "incensed the rabble" (IV, ii, 33), calls them "Cats" (IV, ii, 34) and desires that "the gods had nothing else to do / But to confirm my curses" (IV, ii, 44-5) against them. Instead, Menenius, the aged senator, fulfills the feminine role of trying to sooth her as if he were frightened by the new acquired power of the tribunes, "Peace, peace be not so loud" (IV, ii, 12)

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“Come, come, peace” (IV, ii, 29) he tells Volumnia only to praise her valour later on, after the tribunes have already left, “You have told them home” (IV, ii, 48).

Volumnia’s achievement as a public figure takes place in V, iii when she saves Rome from utter destruction for the second time. As she has done in III, ii, she uses her “art of verbal seduction” (Conejero Dionís-Bayer 2003: 32) and spectacle to stop Coriolanus from destroying Rome. This time she appeals directly to Coriolanus’ emotions, making use of spectacle: she kneels down, reversing the usual gesture of indebtedness and making him acknowledge all he owes to her (Kahn 1997: 157) Coriolanus, overwhelmed, describes the unnaturalness of this act with images of cosmic disorder, “let the pebbles on the hungry beach / Fillip the stars” (V, iii, 57-8).

After having successfully handled spectacle, Volumnia makes use of language to manipulate Coriolanus. In her last speech, Volumnia takes hold of the principles she knows are dear to her son: First, her commitment to him as a mother, “Thou art my warrior; / I help to frame thee” (V, iii, 63-4), “There’s no man in the world / More bound to’s mother” (V, iii, 159-60). Secondly, the loss of honor “That if thou conquer Rome, the benefit / Which thou shalt thereby reap is such a name / Whose repetition will be dogged with curses,” (V, iii, 142-44), that records will say “The man was noble, / But with his last attempt he wiped it out,” (V, iii, 145-6). Thirdly, obedience to the mother, “and the gods will plague thee, / That thou restrain’st from me the duty, which / To a mother’s part belongs.” (V, iii, 166-8). Even she threatens him with “thou shalt no sooner / March to assault thy country than to tread / (Trust to’t, thou shalt not) on thy mother’s womb” (V, iii, 123-4). But the great stroke is her rejection, “This fellow had a Volscian to his mother;” (V, iii, 178). Volumnia’s crude words finally submit Coriolanus. She has “won a happy victory to Rome” (V, iii, 187). But as regards Coriolanus, “Most dangerously you have with him prevailed, / If not most mortal to him.” (V, iii, 188-9)

Volumnia never again utters a line. It is not necessary. Thus, in her last appearance she remains silent. Unlike I,i, where she is mentioned in relation to her son, now that facet disappears. She is no longer Coriolanus’ mother but the “patroness, the life of Rome” (V, v, i). Her power and value is such, that she “Is worth of consuls, senators, patricians, / A city full;” (V, iv, 49-51)

In Coriolanus, Shakespeare shows a female character absolutely devoted to the precepts of Romanness that are essential to patriarchy. In this way, as the transmitter of Roman culture, Volumnia buries deep in her son the concept of *virtus*. But, as Tancke says, she also knows how to use patriarchy for her own benefit. Though



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instrumental to the system, she uses patriarchy to empower herself by controlling her son and by adopting and using the masculine codes proper of patriarchy on her behalf. In this way, she obtains what no other female character does in Shakespeare's tragic play world: to subvert the system by attaining public recognition and to be applauded for so doing.

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